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ABSTRACT

Five instructors from a learning center of an adult county jail were surveyed to identify clients who were possibly mentally retarded. The instructors received in-service training on the definition of mental retardation and characteristics of mentally retarded citizens. Instructors proceeded to refer 20 inmates out of a pool of 250 inmates enrolled in the learning center. The 20 inmates were evaluated. The result of the evaluation indicated 60% (N=12) fell within the mentally retarded range of over-all intellectual functioning. This represented at most 5% of this offender population as being mentally retarded--far less than most current estimates, but enough to warrant special consideration for services. (Author/CL)

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The Mentally Retarded Offender:

A Demographic Study

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ABSTRACT

Five instructors from a learning center of an adult county jail were surveyed for possible clients who were Mentally Retarded. The instructors received in-service on the definition of Mental Retardation and characteristics of Mentally Retarded citizens. Instructors proceeded to refer 20 inmates out of a pool of 250 inmates enrolled in the learning center. The 20 inmates were evaluated. The result of the evaluation indicated 60% (N = 12) fell within the Mentally Retarded range of over-all intellectual functioning. This represented at most 5% of the offender population as being Mentally Retarded who were referred to the learning center; far lower than most current estimates, but high enough to warrant special consideration for services to this population.

THE MENTALLY RETARDED OFFENDER: A DEMOGRAPHIC STUDY

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BACKGROUND

As high as 9% of the entire offender population has been estimated to be mentally retarded (Brown and Courtless, 1967). A more conservative 2% to 5% has been estimated (Denkowski and Denkowski, 1983), (Santamour and West, 1975). Most studies relate to the problems and perplexities of defining and evaluating this population.

The task of identifying the retarded within the Criminal Justice System is difficult. The majority of retarded offenders are mildly retarded with IQ scores between 52-70 (Brown and Courtless, 1967), (Litton and Carubba-Benigno, 1981). This presents problems in identification, since many mildly retarded persons have developed elaborate behaviors of masking their limitations and can be very "streetwise" and "sophisticated" (Santamour and West, 1979).

Furthermore, many professionals within the Criminal Justice System have negative beliefs or misconceptions about the mentally retarded (Schelett, 1978). Most staff have no formal training and limited exposure to the field of mental retardation. The likelihood of accurate identification is low.

The Criminal Justice System, with budgetary constraints, maintenance of facilities, legislative mandates and over-crowding, is not usually designed to have the necessary screening processes and procedures to identify the mentally retarded offender. It is easy to understand how this population could be under-serviced and undiagnosed. Given this situation, questions surface, such as, what are the chances the mentally retarded offender will receive adequate opportunities in legal representation, rehabilitation, or support services?

Paper presented at the Project SHARE Conference, Detroit, Michigan, 1984

The objective of this study was to establish that there are mentally retarded offenders within the specific county facility utilized, and that the number may be significant enough to identify a population that has needs for further identification, education and support services within the auspices of the Criminal Justice System and involved mental retardation services.

METHOD

Subjects

Twenty male inmates aged 18 to 50 were tested from referrals from the learning educational center within the Oakland County Jail, Pontiac, Michigan. The learning center, though located within the jail, is operated by the local school district.

The learning center conducts classes for inmates out of their cells, in classrooms at the jail, and for inmates confined within their cells. For security reasons, some inmates are not allowed to attend classes in classrooms.

Procedure

Five instructors of the learning center have a caseload of approximately fifty (50) students. From this pool of inmates, the learning center instructors were asked for referrals of students they believed to be functioning low academically. The definition of mental retardation (AAMD, 1973) and characteristics of mentally retarded individuals were outlined to the instructors. The inmates were asked to volunteer to be tested and to sign a release form.

Materials

Each of the twenty(20) inmate referrals were tested using the

Slossan Intelligence Test (SIT) and Oral Reading Test (SORT). The Slossan Intelligence Test is essentially a screening test. In order for an accurate and qualitative indication of IQ and Mental Retardation, additional testing would be required, such as the full scale WAIS and adaptive behavior tests. The Slossan was used because of its brevity and ease of scoring and its positive correlations with the Stanford-Binet and the WISC verbal and WISC full scale. The use of the Slossan for indication of only IQ to determine mental retardation is only a cursory measure.

A structured 10 minute interview and investigation of inmate files was undertaken. Birthday, sex, living arrangements, race, city or town, institutionalization record, confinement history, employment or unemployment, type of offense, problems identified, attendance of special education, if any, were determined.

RESULTS

Of the twenty inmates tested, 12 inmates--or 60%--fell within the mentally retarded range. Interestingly, 1/3 of this total may be within the moderately retarded range (Table 1).

The reading scores on the Slossan Oral Reading Test corresponded to the results of the Intelligence tests. Seven of the 12 subjects with IQ's under 75 read at the 4th grade level or below. Six of the twelve identified subjects were at one time in special education programs.

Offenses ranged from serious crimes such as criminal sexual conduct (N = 3) to simple larceny (N = 1) and breaking and entering (N = 1). (See Table 2.) 66% of the subjects with IQs under 75 have been in jail before, while almost 42% have been in prison before. At the time of arrest, 5 of the 12 subjects were employed and 50% were living with their parents. It is

important to note that only 2 inmates resided at the time of arrest in a halfway house or a group home.

DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to surface the issue of the mentally retarded offender. The relative ease of finding 12 of 20 inmates functioning with IQ scores under 75, based on the Slossan, gives an indication that with more accurate, multi-dimensional testing methods, mildly retarded individuals would be found within the general inmate population. Given the characteristics of the mildly retarded population (difficulty with abstractions, difficulty with community living skills...) this unique group would benefit from a thorough diagnostic evaluation. The evaluations would be useful in determining legal counsel, rehabilitative and educational support services for the mentally retarded offender. Specific recommendations include:

1) Additional research, utilizing full scale intelligence tests and testing methodology to comprehensively reflect the inmate population. This would assist in defining the problem and prevalence of the mentally retarded offender.
2) Screen officers, deputies, inmate service workers, counselors, and other involved personnel would benefit from training in identification, characteristics, and needs of the mentally retarded person.
3) In screening procedures for the county jail, the question, "Have you ever attended special education classes?", on the intake sheet would be helpful in identifying inmates, possibly in the mildly retarded range. With PL-94-142, Mandatory Special Education Act, most of the mildly retarded population would have attended special education programs. This could be a preliminary step in a referral system,

where then the inmate services counselors could administer a screening intelligence test (such as the Slossan, used in this study) and if applicable, further tests, so appropriate evaluation and support services can be utilized for the inmate.

4) With a screening/referral system that surfaces the mildly retarded person within the county jail, a full or part-time special education instructor would be helpful in beginning education and rehabilitative instruction to the mentally retarded offender.

TABLE 1

RANGE OF IQ SCORES OF 20 INMATES

IQ RANGE	NUMBER
40-50	2
50-60	4
60-70	4
70-80	6
80-90	3
Above 90	1

TABLE 2

LIST OF OFFENSES

TYPE OF OFFENSE	NUMBER OF INMATES UNDER IQ 75
Bad checks/unlawful use of credit cards	2
Car theft	2
Larceny from building	1
Breaking and entering	1
Criminal sexual conduct	3
Receiving stolen property	2
Simple assault	1

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